

Woodstock-area woman creates The Lisa Libraries to put new books in hands of underprivileged kids

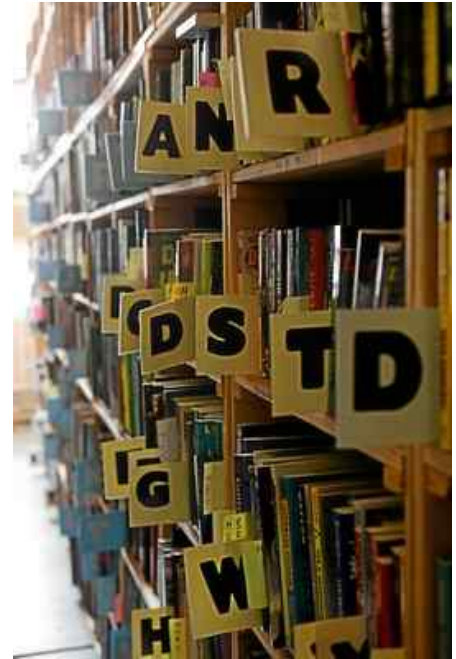
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Lisa Libraries Executive Director Ellen Luksberg works among the shelves of books the organization has for donation. Tania Barricklo — Daily Freeman

Thousands of books line the shelves in the office/warehouse at The Shirt Factory in Kingston, N.Y. Tania Barricklo — Daily Freeman



KINGSTON, N.Y. >> The Lisa Libraries, a nonprofit organization based at the Shirt Factory on Cornell Street, seeks to put new books in the hands of underprivileged children in the Hudson Valley and across the country.

It was founded in 1990 by children's author Ann Martin, creator of the "Baby-Sitters Club" children's book series, along with a group of friends in the publishing industry. It's named in memory of the late Lisa Novak, who was an editor in the children's paperback division of publisher Bantam Books.

Martin, who has lived outside of Woodstock, said she loves being able to give new books to children who usually get hand-me-downs if they get any books at all.

"It's wonderful knowing the kids received the books who otherwise wouldn't be able to buy books or even have access to a book," she said.

As she prepared to depart for a tour for the paperback release of her book "Rain Reign," Martin said the library was initially housed in the closet of her Manhattan apartment. It soon outgrew her apartment and was later relocated to a warehouse space in Brooklyn.

After she moved to the Woodstock area in 1998, the library later followed. Martin said it's been in the Shirt Factory for about 10 years.

Over the years, her friends moved on, but she stayed involved, even if she was forced to pull back for a time. "Children's literacy is a powerful tool," she said.

About two-years ago, she was able to devote more time to the library. "The last couple years I've cut back on writing," she said.

Martin estimates she's written 30 novels and has been involved with more than 300 books, including the series she's worked on.

She explains the process of how The Lisa Libraries books get from publishers, authors, reviewers and illustrators to the children.

“I ask if they’d be able to donate a new book,” Martin said. Over the years, she’s reached out to donors through publishing companies, through the trade publication Publishers Weekly, and word of mouth.

Authors get anywhere from 20 to 100 copies of their book when it’s published, and they often donate them, she said.

Martin is assisted by the group’s executive director, Ellen Luksberg, a retired English teacher who taught at M. Clifford Miller Middle School and once taught freshman English at SUNY Ulster and SUNY New Paltz.

On a recent afternoon, she showed off the library where several large boxes books awaited shipment.

“Those are heading to The Seed School of Miami, a public college preparatory boarding school in Florida,” Luksberg said. Some of the books go to individual children, while others go to organizations that share them, she said.

Luksberg said The Lisa Libraries has donated books to libraries and other organizations whose books have been destroyed by flooding and other natural disasters.

Stacks are filled with books ranging from “board books” for preschoolers to books for young adults. Above the stacks are additional books in large boxes.

They’re arranged by topics like fantasy, graphic novels, classics, sports, movie and TV tie-ins, non-fiction, science and nature and audio books.

Books for the youngest readers move through far faster because most reading programs are targeted at younger children, Luksberg said

“We never have enough to meet demand,” she said.

Finding homes for books for older children takes a bit more outreach, but Luksberg pointed to a recent donation of 100 young adult books to the Grace Smith House, a domestic violence shelter in Poughkeepsie.

While The Lisa Libraries has sent books to children as far as Hawaii, many of the donations stay local, Luksberg said. In Kingston, this included more than 2,000 books for People’s Place, which were distributed at the agency’s “Project Santa” Christmas Program and at a summer program. Parents and grandparents picked out the books, she said.

“We want to get the right book to the right place,” Luksberg said.

The group also donated 160 books to the A.J. Williams-Myers African Roots Library on Gill Street in Kingston’s Ponckhockie neighborhood, to the Kingston Library’s Summer Reading

program and to the Kingston Parks and Recreation Department.

Luksberg said the group has donated books for children to look through while their parents go through proceedings at the Ulster County Family Court; another 200 books to Astor Services for Children and Families in Rhinebeck; METS, a program that serves migrant works in New Paltz; and a food pantry housed at SUNY Dutchess.

In another program, the group works with inmates at a women's prison who do recordings of books to send back to their children, Luksberg said.

Luksberg said she's been involved with The Lisa Libraries for the past two years.

She said she tried retirement but it just didn't work.

And she loves what she does every day.

"When you teach, you have good days and bad days," Luksberg said. "Here, you never have a bad day."